Washington Department of Wildlife

Serving Washington's wildlife and people- now and in the future.

Winter Steelheading in Washington

Almost any Northwest fisherman will tell you that the best thing about winter is winter steelheading. As far as most anglers in this part of the country are concerned, slow steelheading is better than fast fishing for anything else, and when the steelhead fishing gets really good, well, that's heaven.

The more than 100,000 steelhead punchcards sold in Washington each year testify to the popularity of this big sea-run trout, but there are still lots of Evergreen State anglers who have yet to try winter steelheading or who have yet to experience the thrill of landing one of these magnificent game fish. For those people, the following primer on winter steelheading should be helpful.

The steelhead is a West Coast native, and its range extends from about central California to the Bering Sea. It's an anadromous species, like Pacific salmon, which means it hatches in fresh water, migrates out to sea to spend much of its life, then returns to fresh water to spawn. A typical winter steelhead spends a year in the stream after hatching, two to three years in the Pacific and returns to its home stream sometime from October to April, where it spawns and produces another generation to continue the process.

TROPHY SIZED

Most steelhead spend only two years in the ocean, and these "two-salt" fish return as five- to eight-pound adults. Some remain in the Pacific a third year, where they grow another season and return as bragging-size 10- to 15-pounders. On occasion, anglers catch fish that have stayed at sea for four, five, even six years, or repeat spawners that may be making their second or third trip back to fresh water. These are the trophy fish that end up on den walls. A winter steelhead over 20 pounds is considered a trophy, and now and then they may even top 30 pounds. The state record winter steelhead, caught from the the East Fork of the Lewis River, weighed 32 pounds, 12 ounces.

STOUT TACKLE

Big fish require stout tackle, so steelheaders use rods, reels and line that can handle five- to 30-pound fish in the big rivers of the West Coast.

Most steelhead rods are 7 1/2 to 8 1/2 feet long, with a long butt section for added leverage and comfortable, day-long casting. It can be either a large-guided spinning rod or a casting rod, but it should be strong enough to handle large fish, yet sensitive enough to telegraph the often-subtle strike of a steelhead. Most winter steelheaders prefer the light weight, strength and sensitivity of graphite or boron rods.

Some anglers use spinning reels, but most prefer the added line control of a levelwind casting reel. There are lots of good ones on the market these days, with a wide range of options to choose from. You'll have to decide whether you want left-hand or right-hand crank, direct-drive, star drag or both, magnetic braking system, large or small spool. Look around a little and you'll find the reel with the combination of options you want. Whatever its options, a winter steelhead reel should be large enough to hold at least 150 yards of line and tough enough to hold up under hard use and heavy fish.

As for line, buy a premium-grade monofilament that's tough enough to resist the abrasion of constant contact with a rocky, snag-covered river bottom. Line size is a matter of preference, with anglers using everything from six-pound to 20-pound test. Twelve- to 14 pound works fine in most situations.

DRIFT-FISHING

Drift-fishing is the most popular steelheading technique, one that's used both by bank fishermen and boat anglers. As the name implies, it's a

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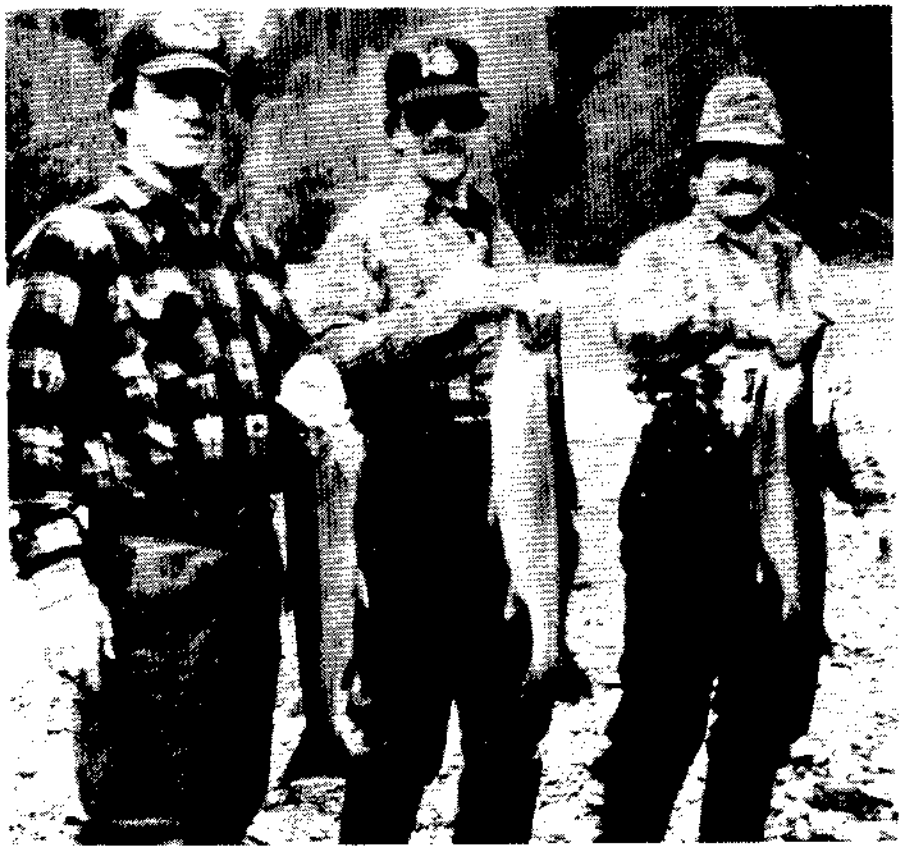
matter of casting slightly upstream, letting the bait or lure settle to the bottom and drift along with the current. At the end of each drift, as the line straightens out below the angler, he reels in and repeats the process. The drift-fisherman may make hundreds of casts a day as he works his way along from pool to pool, staying on the move until the offering passes in front of a cooperative fish.

The key to drift fishing is using the proper weight sinker for the job. Each little stretch of steelhead water is different, requiring more or less weight to keep the lure near the bottom where the steelhead are. Too heavy a sinker drags along and hangs up constantly, resulting in lost tackle and flustered fishermen. Too light a sinker and you can't keep a bait or lure close enough to the bottom.

Just as important as proper sinker weight are attentiveness and good reflexes on the part of a drift-fisherman. The novice has a tough time telling a soft strike from just another bounce of the sinker on the bottom, so you have to be alert at all times and be ready to set the hook when the line stops just a little longer than it should or when something doesn't feel quite right. Those snags at the bottom of the river that "feel funny" usually turn out to be steelhead.

BACK-BOUNCING

"Back-bouncing" is a sort of modified drift-fishing technique practiced by boat anglers. They use a heavier sinker than that used for standard drift-fishing and instead of casting to the fish-holding water, they use the boat to edge downstream slowly through it. As they "back" downstream, they bounce their bait along the bottom ahead of them, lifting and dropping the rod to keep the offering hopping down through the pool. By fishing straight down rather than across the water, the back-bouncer finds it easier to detect strikes and usually encounters fewer hang-ups and less lost gear.



PLUNKING

Plunking is a more laid-back fishing method than either drift-fishing or back-bouncing. Rather than going in search of his fish, the plunker sits and waits for the fish to come to him. Using a large enough sinker to anchor a bait or lure near the bottom, the plunker fishes a spot where steelhead are likely to pass by. After dropping his line in the water and propping his fishing rod up in a holder or forked stick, he usually builds a roaring fire, pours himself a cup of coffee, hunkers down in his lawn chair and waits for things to happen. Many plunkers even attach a bell to the tip of their rods to sound an alarm in case a fish hits after the fisherman nods off.

HOT-SHOTTING

The last steelheading method is often referred to as "plugging." It's also known as "Hot-Shotting," after the plug first employed in this kind of fishing. The Hot Shot is still one of the most popular diving plugs for this kind of fishing, but many other styles are now used as well. Plugging was developed by boat anglers, who simply pay out several yards of line, then row or motor against the current to hold the boat stationary while the plug digs deeper and deeper into the water below. The boater then works his way slowly downstream, zig-zagging back and forth to cover an entire pool before moving on to work the next likely stretch of steelhead water.

Plugging can also work for bank anglers, but it's much harder for them

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to cover an entire pool, unless they use a new piece of equipment especially designed to help the bank-bound angler fish plugs. It's called a Side Planer, and it's attached to the line above the plug. When pulled against the current, the Side Planer angles off away from the bank, carrying the plug out to various parts of the pool where fish might be lying.

BAITS

Steelheaders use a wide range of baits and artificial lures to draw steelhead strikes. Clusters of fresh salmon or steelhead roe are a top bait choice. The skeins of eggs from mature female fish are cut in strawberry-size clusters, dusted in borax and placed in the refrigerator or freezer until it's time to use them. Most anglers use a special loop knot to attach their lines or leaders to their hooks. The egg cluster is inserted in the loop so that it stays on the hook until a fish hits or until the cluster slowly disintegrates.

Fresh ghost shrimp have also become a popular winter steelhead bait. Anglers who live near salt water areas dig a fresh supply of these wriggly little strike-getters before going out, or they can be purchased from many bait dealers around western Washington. They're usually fished much the same as egg clusters, on a 14- to 20-inch leader with just enough weight to take them to the bottom.

STEELHEAD BOBBERS

The most popular artificial steelhead lure is the buoyant "bobber," which is available in about as many styles and fluorscent shades as you'd care to describe. The Li'l Corky, Birdy Drifter, Okie Drifter, Spin 'N Glo and Glo-Go are some of the more popular steelhead bobbers. They can be purchased already rigged with hooks or simply as bodies to be rigged any way the angler wants to rig them. Many anglers fish them above a single, bare hook, while others like their bobbers spiced with a small egg cluster or a little nylon yarn on the hook.

RIGGING THE SINKER

There are several kinds of sinker rigs that will do the job. Because a good, bottom-bouncing steelheader is going to hang up on the rocks and snags a lot, it's a good idea to rig the sinker so that it will break away and be lost while the more expensive lure can be retrieved. This calls for a "dropper" sinker, and the most popular rig is lead wire, often called pencil lead, which is inserted into rubber surgical tubing to attach it to the line. The tubing can be placed directly above the hook, or it can be attached to the dropper eye of a three-way swivel between the main line and the leader. Some steelheaders prefer to use a short piece of monofilament leader for a dropper rather than the surgical tubing. The sinker goes at one end of the leader, and the other end is tied to the dropper eye of a swivel.

SPOONS AND SPINNERS

Two kinds of steelhead lures that don't require a sinker to get them to the bottom are the weighted spinner and wobbling spoon. Spinners and spoons are effective steelhead lures when worked right along the bottom just fast enough to make them wiggle, spin or whatever it is the particular spinner or spoon is supposed to do. Hammered brass, nickel, red-and-white and fluorescent orange are the most commonly used spoon and spinner finishes along western Washington steelhead streams.

Every angler has his own preferences about what size and style hook is best for steelheading. Most fishermen use something in the size 2 to size 2/0 range, with 1s and 1/0s most common. Both nickel and bronze hooks are used, and most steelheaders prefer those with a short or medium shank and no barbs on the back of the shank.

OTHER EQUIPMENT

As for miscellaneous equipment, most good steelheaders carry their tackle in a fishing vest rather than a tackle box, so they can stay mobile and always have both hands free to fish. Drift-fishermen are on the move much of the time, and a tackle box just gets in the way. The contents of the vest should include a good pair of needle-nose pliers for crimping sinkers, unhooking fish and all those other odd jobs. A small hook file to sharpen hooks is another must.

Steelhead can be beached, netted or gaffed. A net tends to get in the way of on-the-go drift-fishermen, but plunkers and boat fishermen should have one. The drift-angler might want to go with a small gaff instead, one that will fit into a vest pocket so that it's out of the way, but always handy.

Armed with all this basic information, you now have to get out there and see what all the excitement is about. Choose a river from the accompanying list, pick up a few of the tackle items mentioned, buy yourself a fishing license and steelhead punchcard and go for it. There's no reason why you shouldn't be one of the over 100,000 eager anglers out there getting the most out of winter.

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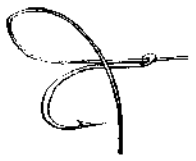
TOP WINTER STEELHEAD RIVERS AND BEST MONTHS TO FISH THEM

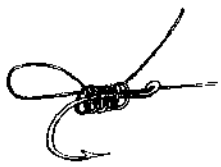
Cowlitz	December
Puyallup	January
Green	January
Elochoman	December
Skagit	January
Skykomish	January
Hoh	January
Bogachiel	December
East Fork Lewis	December
Elwha	December
Washougal	December
Snoqualmie	January
Kalama	December
Willapa	December
Naselle	December
Queets	January
Humptulips	March
North Fork Lewis	December
Nisqually	March
North Fork Stillaguamish	January
Snohomish	December
Sol Duc	February
Samish	January
Lyre	December
Calawah	January

TYING THE EGG LOOP KNOT



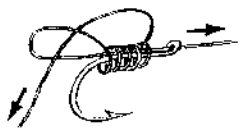
Step 1

STEP 1.
Pull about two inches of line through the hook eye and form a loop near the bend of the hook.



Step 2

STEP 2.
Holding the loop between a thumb and forefinger, bring the tag end of the line forward and make about five wraps around the hook, wrapping towards the eye.



Step 3

STEP 3.
Bring the tag end back through the loop and tighten the knot with tension on the line in both directions.

Step 4

STEP 4.
The final product is a knot that slides on the hook shank so that egg clusters and nylon yarn can be secured between the knot and the eye of the hook.

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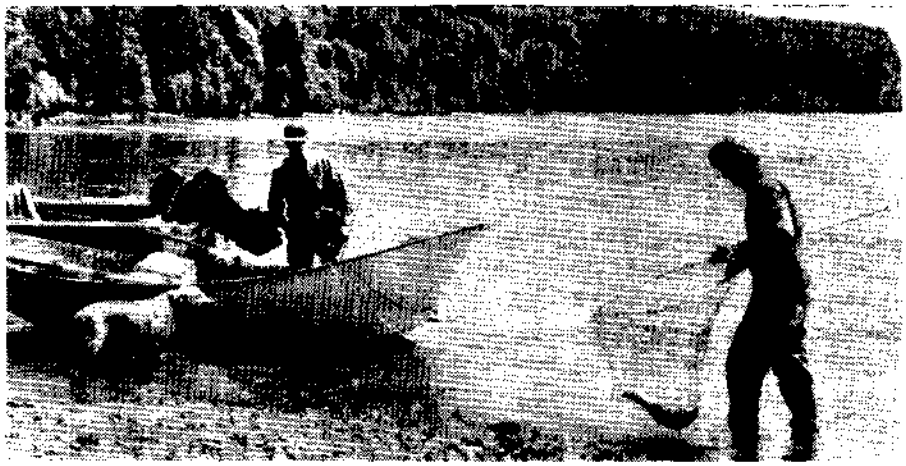

Summer Steelheading in Washington

Mention steelhead fishing and most Northwest anglers think of cold winter mornings, wet snow, ice-clogged rod guides, numb fingers and cold rain dripping down the back of the neck. It's true that winter steelheading and all its associated miseries —and *thrills*— are an important part of our way of life here in the Evergreen State, but it might be news to some people to hear that there is another kind of steelhead fishing available here, one that doesn't require long underwear, wool mittens or hooded parkas to help make it reasonably enjoyable.

If you would love to hook a big, chrome-bright, hard-fighting steelhead, but aren't sure it's worth freezing to death for, then summer steelheading is for you.

Like their winter cousins, summer-run steelhead spawn in Northwest rivers from mid-winter to spring. The difference is that summer fish come into the river several months in advance, often arriving in May or June, more than six months before they spawn.

Summer steelhead fishing is becoming more and more popular in Washington, and it's easy to understand why. Better weather is only one of the things that summer steelheading has going for it. For one thing, this kind of steelhead fishing is a lot better suited to family fishing trips than is winter fishing. The kids are out of school during the summer, so the whole family can take a week off and enjoy the challenge of steelhead angling together.

The summer-run steelhead's fighting ability is another important factor in its popularity. The winter-run variety is no slouch when it comes to giving a fisherman a run for his money, but summer fish are the undisputed champs when it comes to fighting. A hooked fish will race up and down the river in a series of bursts that will keep even an experienced angler guessing, with blazing runs interrupted often by twisting leaps that carry the fish four feet out of the water. It isn't unusual for a hooked summer steelhead to jump a half-dozen times before it's finally landed.

It's the warmer water of summer that makes the fish such active fighters—a typical Washington river may be 10 to 15 degrees warmer in July than in January.

Water temperature and the fact that a summer steelhead may be in the river six months or more before spawning make these fish more active feeders than their winter-run counterparts. Scientists have shown that adult steelhead don't necessarily have to eat to survive during their spawning runs into freshwater, but summer fish are a lot more likely to feed than winter-runs. And when they feel like grabbing a snack, nothing is going to stop them. Unlike the often light, hesitant strike of a winter fish, a summer-run tends to slam a bait or lure with all the subtlety of an MX missile, making it easy for even the novice angler to tell when a fish has come to call.

Perhaps the most significant factor in the summer-run steelhead's popularity has been the expansion of its range by the Department of Wildlife. The simple fact is that there are more places to catch summer steelhead now than there used to be, so more and more anglers are discovering this fantastic fish without having to drive long distances to do so.

The Green River, between Seattle and Tacoma, is a good example of how the department's steelhead management strategy has brought summer steelhead to the masses. There were no summer steelhead in the Green until 1970. Summer-run fingerlings were planted in the river that year, and adult fish from that plant returned in 1972. Anglers now catch hundreds of summer steelhead from the Green each year. It has been one of the state's top 20 summer steelhead rivers for each of the past several years, sometimes giving up as many as 3,000 fish in a single summer season.